

From Audience to Co-Creator: Participatory Public Program Design Around Fotografiska Shanghai's The Pet Show

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Abstract

Public programs have become an important means through which cultural institutions extend exhibition experiences beyond passive viewing. Yet in practice, “participation” is often treated as a general indicator of audience engagement, with insufficient distinction between the forms of interpretive agency that participants actually acquire. Taking Fotografiska Shanghai's The Pet Show as an existing exhibition context, this article analyzes three proposed public programs conceived and designed by the author around the exhibition. Using a design-oriented curatorial case-study approach, it examines how structural design can create conditions for audiences to move from spectators to co-creators of cultural meaning, while comparing participatory mechanisms developed for different publics. Theoretically, the article brings together Nina Simon's participatory museum model, Claire Bishop's critique of participatory art, and Suzanne Lacy's account of socially engaged practice. It proposes three modes of co-creation—material, narrative, and discursive—and identifies emotional perception, creative expression, and critical reflection as three parallel entry points into participation. The article argues that the analysis of participatory curating should focus not on the number of activities offered, but on how interpretive agency is redistributed and how participant-generated content enters processes of production, negotiation, and circulation. Because the three public programs remain curatorial design proposals rather than official programs implemented by Fotografiska Shanghai, the article limits its claims to the participatory possibilities supported by the designs and does not present anticipated effects as observed audience change. The framework is intended as an analytical and design tool that can be tested through subsequent practice and empirical research.

Keywords: participatory curating, public programs, curatorial design, audience participation, co-creation, Fotografiska Shanghai

1. Introduction

Public programs are increasingly central to the ways cultural institutions interpret exhibitions, build relationships with communities, and define their public roles. Artist talks, workshops, collaborative making, and facilitated discussions can extend exhibitions temporally and socially, enabling audiences to respond to what they encounter, bring personal experience into institutional space, and produce forms of knowledge that cannot be accommodated through display alone (Bishop, 2012). This development reflects a broader shift in curatorial practice from the one-way transmission of authoritative interpretation toward more dialogic and participatory forms of cultural mediation. Within such a model, audiences are no longer merely the final recipients of curatorial information but become part of the processes through which meaning is produced, contested, revised, and circulated (Simon, 2010).

However, “participation” itself is a concept with blurred boundaries. A visitor pressing an interactive button, a child completing a drawing, a photographer telling the story behind an image, and an adult taking part in an ethical discussion may all be described as “participants,” yet the degree and nature of their agency are clearly

different. For public programs, this ambiguity matters. If participation is understood primarily in terms of attendance, activity levels, or entertainment, the language of “co-creation” can remain rhetorical rather than analytically meaningful. A cultural institution may appear highly participatory while still retaining almost complete control over the questions being asked, the range of legitimate interpretations, and the outcomes presented. A more useful analysis therefore needs to distinguish between “being active” and possessing interpretive agency.

This article compares three proposed public programs developed in relation to Fotografiska Shanghai’s The Pet Show. It is important to clarify that The Pet Show constitutes the pre-existing exhibition and thematic context of this study, while *Pets’ Feelings*, *Pets’ Eyes*, and *Pets’ Impact* are independent curatorial designs by the author rather than official public programs published or implemented by Fotografiska Shanghai. *Pets’ Feelings* is designed for children aged five to ten and their families, centering on collaborative parent–child drawing. *Pets’ Eyes* targets young people aged approximately fifteen to twenty-five and centers on photography, storytelling, and peer response. *Pets’ Impact* is intended for adults and uses interdisciplinary discussion and structured interaction to address pet companionship, well-being, and human–animal ethics. The three programs use emotional perception, creative expression, and critical reflection as their principal entry points, but these are treated as parallel design strategies rather than as age-based hierarchies of ability or participatory intensity.

The central research question is: how can exhibition-based public programs create conditions for audiences to move from passive spectators to active co-creators of cultural meaning? Two related questions follow. First, how should participatory mechanisms be differentiated for different publics? Second, how can public programs extend the social and ethical issues of an exhibition beyond the gallery display? Because the objects of analysis are curatorial designs rather than implemented interventions supported by systematic audience data, the study does not seek to measure changes in participant attitudes or behavior. Instead, it analyzes the participatory structures constructed by the three programs and the different forms and degrees of co-creative space that these structures make available to audiences.

This article argues that the key to participatory curating lies not in simply increasing the number of audience activities, but in how curatorial structures reconfigure relations of power in meaning production and interpretation. Its conceptual contribution is twofold. First, it distinguishes three principal modes of co-creation—material, narrative, and discursive—in order to identify what participants actually produce. Second, it connects these modes to the principal entry points through which different publics participate, providing a means of analyzing relationships among structure, agency, and the circulation of meaning. At the level of practice, the article further proposes an audience-responsive design logic that can help cultural institutions clarify participant roles, forms of contribution, and mechanisms of circulation.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 *From Viewing to Participation*

Nina Simon’s *The Participatory Museum* provides an important foundation for understanding changing audience roles in cultural institutions. Simon (2010) argues that the core of a participatory cultural institution is not simply the addition of interactive activities, but the use of institutional and programmatic design to enable audiences to move from recipients of content to contributors who participate in the production of cultural meaning through personal experience, knowledge, objects, and social relationships. Compared with traditional institution-centered communication models, participatory practice places greater emphasis on audience agency in processes of content production and interpretation. Similarly, Black (2005) argues that contemporary museums need to move away from one-way knowledge transmission toward more responsive and participatory relationships with audiences, allowing audience experience to become part of museum meaning-making.

In this sense, participation does not require curators to abandon professional judgment; rather, it entails a partial shift in the focus of curatorial work. Curating involves not only selecting works, organizing knowledge, and designing displays, but also designing the conditions of participation: invitations, tasks, sequences of activity, interactive interfaces, and social rules among participants. This article describes this process as a participatory architecture: a curatorial structure that defines how audiences enter a program, what they can contribute, and how those contributions can be displayed, responded to, and circulated further. This is consistent with Simon’s (2010) participatory design principles: effective participation does not depend on openness alone, but requires clear structures, participatory goals, and intelligible relationships between participants and institutions.

This structural understanding is particularly important for public programs. An open invitation to participate does not automatically generate meaningful contributions; participants also need to understand their roles, what they are contributing to, and how their contributions will be seen and responded to by others. Drawing on Simon (2010), this article therefore treats “participatory architecture” as a unit of analysis, focusing on role definition, task sequence, the visibility of contributions, and mechanisms for the circulation of meaning rather than equating

workshops, voting, or discussion with participation in themselves.

Simon's theory also helps distinguish accessibility from participatory agency. Free admission, weekend scheduling, lower technical thresholds, and materials suited to different age groups can all make a program more accessible, but accessibility alone does not constitute co-creation. Hooper-Greenhill's (2000) research on museum learning demonstrates that audiences do not passively receive predetermined knowledge; they actively construct meaning through personal experience, prior knowledge, and social context. Yet audience interpretation can become agency within participatory curating only when institutional structures provide spaces for that meaning to be expressed and circulated. Co-creation therefore implies that at least some responsibility for content production or interpretation shifts from the institution to participants. A program with large attendance may remain highly institution-led, while a smaller program may generate intensive collaborative meaning-making (Lynch, 2011).

2.2 From Interaction to Co-Creation

Claire Bishop's critique of participatory art provides an important theoretical basis for distinguishing interaction, participation, and co-creation. Bishop (2012) rejects the assumption that participation is inherently democratic, emancipatory, or socially progressive, arguing instead that participatory art must be evaluated in relation to its specific organization, power structures, aesthetic experiences, and social relations. In other words, the existence of participation is not in itself evidence of value; what matters is the degree of action and interpretive space made available to participants.

This argument is particularly relevant to public programs in cultural institutions. A workshop may contain numerous physical activities and interactive elements while leaving core interpretive authority in the hands of the curator or facilitator. Conversely, a discussion that produces no material object may grant participants considerable interpretive agency through sustained exchange and negotiation of meaning. This article therefore does not use the number of activities or frequency of interaction as its primary measure of participation. Instead, it asks whether audiences actually enter processes of meaning production, interpretation, and negotiation. This distinction also resonates with Carpentier's (2011) discussion of participation: participation differs from contact or interaction more generally because it concerns whether participants acquire a substantive position in decision-making, meaning formation, or the distribution of power.

On this basis, the article makes an analytical distinction among interaction, participation, and co-creation. Interaction primarily refers to participants responding to content or tasks predetermined by the institution. Participation means that participants' actions, choices, or contributions have some influence on the program process. Co-creation goes further, referring to participants entering processes of content production, interpretation, negotiation, and the circulation of meaning. These concepts do not necessarily form a simple hierarchy of value. Interaction can itself be valuable for guided tours, information access, or lowering barriers to engagement, and not every component of a public program needs to pursue intensive co-creation. The key question is whether a program contains identifiable mechanisms that redistribute interpretive agency so that meaning production is no longer completed entirely by the institution (Bishop, 2012).

This conceptual distinction also reveals that co-creation can take different forms. The first is material co-creation, in which participants make images, texts, objects, or display content that becomes part of the public program. The second is narrative co-creation, in which stories, captions, oral experiences, and peer responses alter how an object or theme is understood. The third is discursive co-creation, in which participants enter public discussion and negotiate among different forms of knowledge, experience, and value positions. Museum research has likewise shown that the significance of participatory practice lies not only in content production but also in the renegotiation of knowledge relations, institutional authority, and public voice (Lynch, 2011). Distinguishing among different modes of co-creation therefore avoids reducing participation to hands-on making and makes different types of public program analytically comparable.

2.3 Public Programs as Social Practice

Lacy (1995) argues that artistic practice can move beyond the production of conventional objects and become a social practice by organizing relationships, generating dialogue, and gathering social issues. Within this framework, artists and curators are not only producers of objects but may also become organizers of social relations and facilitators of public discussion. Public programs in cultural institutions can therefore be understood not merely as educational supplements to exhibitions, but as temporary forms of social infrastructure through which participants with different forms of knowledge and lived experience gather around shared issues.

This approach resonates with Kester's (2004) work on dialogical art practice. Kester emphasizes that dialogue itself can constitute an important component of artistic and cultural production; its value need not be embodied in a final material object, but may lie in ongoing processes of exchange, negotiation, and understanding among different subjects. Thus, when public programs address issues such as animal ethics, care, mental health, or

social responsibility, discussion and relationships can themselves become important sites of curatorial meaning production.

This relational perspective also provides a theoretical basis for the distinction made later in this article between “audiences” and “publics.” Warner (2002) understands a public as a relational collectivity formed through the circulation of and response to discourse, rather than as a group defined in advance by demographic characteristics. For public programs, this means that a “public” is not only identified before an event begins; it may also be temporarily constituted as participants view, respond to, and negotiate one another’s contributions.

In *Empathic Vision*, Bennett (2005) proposes that empathic viewing is not a simple projection of the viewer’s own experience onto another, but a form of affective encounter through visual and sensory experience that simultaneously preserves the difference of the object. For this study, the value of the concept is not that it presupposes participation will “increase empathy,” but that it helps analyze how emotional perception can be designed curatorially as an entry point into observation, expression, and reflection.

Azoulay (2008) understands photography as an ongoing social relation among photographer, photographed subject, and viewer rather than as a neutral visual record. The meaning of a photograph therefore continues to be generated through viewing, circulation, response, and reinterpretation. For the youth photography program discussed here, this perspective provides an analytical lens: participants not only produce images but also confront how their representational choices organize relations of looking between humans and animals.

Taken together, Simon, Bishop, and Lacy form the principal theoretical chain of this article. Simon (2010) explains how cultural institutions can create conditions for audience contribution through structural design; Bishop (2012) provides a critical criterion for judging whether participation actually produces interpretive agency; and Lacy (1995) situates participation within the production of public dialogue and social relations. Bennett (2005) and Azoulay (2008) add analytical dimensions concerning affective viewing and the relationality of photography, while Warner (2002) supports the later discussion of how publics are formed through interaction. On this basis, the article understands participatory public programming as a curatorial practice that reconfigures relationships among content production, interpretation, and the circulation of meaning.

2.4 Analytical Framework: Three Modes of Co-Creation

Based on this literature, the article constructs two interconnected analytical dimensions. The first concerns the principal entry point through which a public enters the program: emotional perception, creative expression, or critical reflection. These are neither fixed psychological stages nor indicators of ability across children, young people, and adults; rather, they summarize the most prominent curatorial invitation offered by each program. The second dimension concerns the dominant form of co-creation that emerges once participants enter processes of meaning production and is used to compare how different programs redistribute opportunities for content production, interpretation, and response.

The second dimension conceptualizes co-creation as material, narrative, and discursive. Material co-creation concerns how participant-generated works or visual content enter public presentation; narrative co-creation concerns how personal experience, stories, and peer interpretation alter the ways objects are understood; and discursive co-creation concerns how different forms of knowledge, experience, and value positions become shared issues through discussion and response. The three modes can overlap within a single program. Their purpose is not to rank the intensity of participation, but to identify the particular process of meaning production into which participant contributions enter.

Figure 1 summarizes this framework. The three pathways are presented in parallel in order to avoid interpreting emotional perception, creative expression, and critical reflection as an age-based progression. The analysis instead asks how different curatorial structures connect particular participatory entry points with modes of co-creation and, on that basis, compares relationships among audience characteristics, participatory mechanisms, and anticipated cultural outcomes.

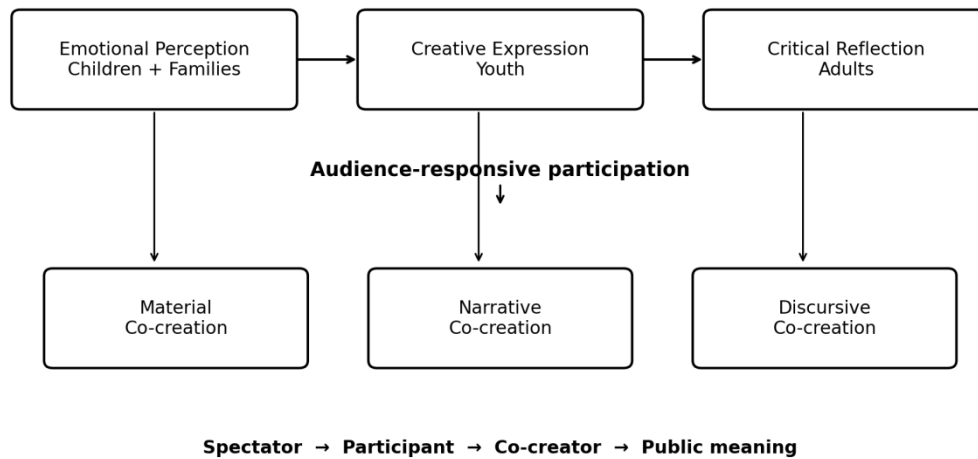


Figure 1. Audience-responsive participatory curating framework proposed in this study

3. Research Method and Case Context

3.1 A Design-Oriented Curatorial Case Study

This article adopts a design-oriented curatorial case-study method, using a set of public program proposals that have not yet been implemented as its analytical material. Unlike practice-based research focused on the outcomes of implemented projects, this study examines how participation is pre-structured within curatorial proposals: what roles are assigned to audiences, how activities are sequenced, which contributions can enter public presentation, and which interpretive and ethical responsibilities remain with the institution. The three programs are therefore treated as comparable design propositions rather than interventions whose effects have already been validated.

The analytical materials consist of complete public program proposals, including program descriptions, audience segmentation, activity sequences, facilitation structures, anticipated outputs, and theoretical rationales. To ensure consistency across cases, the study uses a four-dimensional analytical matrix: first, through what entry point does the target public encounter the exhibition theme; second, what are participants invited to produce or contribute; third, what opportunities for interpretation and response does the design provide; and fourth, how are these contributions displayed, exchanged, or circulated further? This matrix is used to identify shared design principles across the three programs and differences in the distribution of agency.

The researcher also participated in the curatorial design of all three public program proposals. This position enables design rationales and decision-making processes to be incorporated directly into the analysis, but it also introduces the risk of confirmation bias. To mitigate this risk, the article does not treat the curator's subjective intentions as evidence of effects. Instead, it analyzes the structural conditions of the three programs using the theoretical framework and consistent comparative dimensions outlined above, reserving all claims about actual audience responses for future empirical research.

Because the objects of study are design proposals, the article limits its claims to the participatory possibilities supported by the designs and makes no causal inferences about actual participatory outcomes. Expressions such as “support,” “invite,” and “create conditions for” are used to describe the roles and spaces for action made available by curatorial structures. Claims such as “increasing empathy,” “changing attitudes,” or “producing behavioral change” would require post-implementation questionnaires, interviews, observations, or other empirical evidence.

3.2 Case Context: *The Pet Show and Fotografiska Shanghai*

This article takes Fotografiska Shanghai's photography exhibition *The Pet Show* as its curatorial context. Using photography as its principal medium, the exhibition addresses human–animal relationships as emotional, social, and cultural questions. Fotografiska's institutional philosophy emphasizes the role of photography in raising public awareness and fostering social dialogue; public programming can therefore function as a curatorial mechanism for extending exhibition content beyond visual display (Fotografiska, n.d.). Within this context, the present project does not treat companion animals merely as objects to be viewed, loved, or consumed, but as cultural subjects through which family relationships, social identity, care, control, and ethical responsibility can be discussed.

Two artistic practices in the exhibition directly informed the public program designs. Wang Hanlin's *Animal Capital* situates animals within contemporary urban life and human social structures, offering the family workshop a visual entry point for discussing family relations, social structures, and consumer culture (Fotografiska Shanghai, n.d.-b). Sophie Gamand's photographic practice, particularly the *Wet Dog* series, uses animal expression, bodily states, and vulnerability to expose tensions among human control, emotional projection, and animal subjectivity, providing young participants with a critical reference point for reconsidering conventional "cute" representations of pets (Fotografiska Shanghai, n.d.-a).

At the level of program design, the three proposals employ an operational form of audience segmentation. The family workshop is primarily intended for children aged five to ten and their parents; the youth photography program is aimed mainly at participants aged approximately fifteen to twenty-five; and the adult program primarily targets participants around twenty-five to forty-five years old. These age ranges are used to organize different participatory mechanisms rather than to essentialize the capacities of particular groups. Table 1 presents only the principal entry points and design intentions of the three programs; their specific differences are analyzed in Sections 4 and 5.

Table 1. Comparative overview of the three proposed public programs

Program Public /	Primary Entry Point	Participation Mechanism	Dominant outcome co-created
Pets' Feelings Children + families	Emotional Perception	Exhibition looking, parent-child drawing, sharing, display	Material artifact + shared interpretation
Pets' Eyes Youth	Creative Expression	Photography, storytelling, peer response, voting	Narrative meaning + peer interpretation
Pets' Impact Adults	Critical Reflection	Expert framing, facilitated interaction, questions, ethical dialogue	Discursive meaning + public reflection

4. Participatory Design for Three Publics

4.1 *Pets' Feelings: Material Co-Creation Through Family Collaboration*

Pets' Feelings is designed for children aged five to ten and their parents and consists primarily of exhibition viewing, collaborative parent-child drawing, sharing, and on-site display. The key to the project is not the addition of drawing as an interactive activity, but the placement of making after exhibition viewing so that visual creation becomes a means through which participants respond to exhibition content. Participants translate their observations of animals' expressions, behaviors, and social relationships into a jointly produced visual work. Drawing is therefore not a craft activity detached from the exhibition, but a form of visual interpretation.

The program begins with facilitated looking. Unlike a conventional tour centered on knowledge transmission, this stage does not prescribe a single correct interpretation. Instead, questions concerning animal expression, posture, emotion, and relationships direct attention while enabling participants to form their own observations and judgments. For children, emotion and behavior provide accessible cues for interpreting images and allow personal observation to become the basis for subsequent making. Parents, meanwhile, move beyond the roles of chaperone and supervisor to participate with children in looking, discussion, and negotiation of meaning. The family thus becomes the basic participatory unit of the program.

During collaborative drawing, interpretation is further transformed into content production. Children and parents jointly decide what to depict, which situations and emotions matter, and what narrative emphasis the work should carry. Rather than asking participants to reproduce existing works from the exhibition, the program allows them to generate new visual content based on their own interpretations. In curatorial terms, this means that part of the production of meaning shifts from institutionally predetermined exhibition content to participating families. The drawing can therefore be understood as a material record of participants' reinterpretation of the exhibition theme.

Sharing and temporary display further strengthen this mechanism. If drawing remained within the family unit, participation would largely remain a private form of collaboration. When families introduce their works to others and place them in a public display area, audience-generated content acquires a new public status. The cultural institution continues to determine the theme, time, space, and basic rules of the program, but the visible curatorial content is no longer produced entirely by the institution. Audience interpretations gain an opportunity to enter public cultural space, echoing Simon's (2010) account of the shift from content recipient to contributor.

This article describes this mode as material co-creation. Co-creation here is not primarily judged by the artistic quality of the resulting work, but by the processes of shared observation, family negotiation, and visual interpretation that the work carries. The material outcome is a visible vehicle for the participatory process; its curatorial significance derives from the continuous relationship among looking, making, and public sharing. This also demonstrates that hands-on participation alone is insufficient to constitute co-creation. Participant agency becomes more clearly positioned only when making is connected to exhibition interpretation and public expression.

At the level of accessibility, weekend scheduling, small-scale organization, and child-friendly materials are intended to lower practical barriers to participation. These conditions, however, are only the basis for entering the program. More directly related to co-creation is the positioning of the family as a collaborative unit within processes of looking, negotiation, and expression, allowing children and parents jointly to assume part of the responsibility for interpretation and content production.

4.2 Pets' Eyes: Narrative Co-Creation Through Photography and Peer Interpretation

Pets' Eyes is designed for young participants aged approximately fifteen to twenty-five. Photography serves as the primary medium, while image production, storytelling, on-site display, and peer response form the participatory structure. Compared with the family workshop, this program gives participants a higher degree of autonomy over content: they decide what images to make or select, organize their own interpretations, and view, respond to, and evaluate the work of others.

Sophie Gamand's photographic practice functions not simply as a technical model but as a critical entry point for reconsidering the visual culture of pets. In everyday social media and consumer culture, companion animals are frequently represented through familiar visual conventions of cuteness, humor, intimacy, and companionship. Although such images are highly shareable, they may also simplify animals' complex emotional and social relations. By introducing Gamand's attention to animal expression, bodily vulnerability, human control, and emotional projection, the program reframes photography from everyday documentation as a representational practice open to critical reflection, encouraging participants to consider how images construct relationships between humans and animals.

Within this structure, the photograph is only the first layer of participant contribution. The second is narrative: participants explain the situation, emotion, relationship, or personal experience behind the image. Image production is thus connected to verbal interpretation, and participants become not only photographers but narrators of the meanings of their own works. Through this mechanism, interpretive authority within the exhibition and public program is no longer located exclusively with artists, curators, or facilitators, but is partially opened to participants themselves. Personal narratives also allow context, affect, and uncertainty that cannot be directly represented in the image to enter public exchange.

The third layer of participation comes from peer interpretation. Participants not only display their own photographs but also view, listen to, and respond to the work of others. Voting is not intended to establish an objective ranking of artistic quality; rather, it operates as a social mechanism that gives participants a reason to look carefully at and compare different narratives. Each participant therefore occupies multiple roles—photographer, narrator, viewer, and respondent. The meaning of an image is no longer determined by a single subject but continues to emerge through the creator's account, peers' viewing, and collective response.

This article describes this mode as narrative co-creation. Its principal outcome is not a collection of independent photographs but a temporary network of meaning constituted by images, personal narratives, and peer responses. In relation to Simon's (2010) discussion of audience contribution, the program creates structural conditions for participants to produce and interpret content. Bishop's (2012) critique of participatory practice, meanwhile, reminds us that meaningful participation cannot be judged solely by activity format; it requires attention to the actual degree of expressive and interpretive space participants receive. By this criterion, young participants do more than complete predetermined tasks: to some extent, they participate in the formation and circulation of the program's meaning.

Azoulay's (2008) account of the relationality of photography further reveals the ethical dimension of this design. Photography does not simply record a pre-existing object; it also establishes relations among photographer, photographed subject, and viewer. In companion-animal photography, participants can therefore consider not only whether an image is visually appealing but also how they look at, select, and represent animals. The program cannot demonstrate that this design will necessarily change attitudes or increase ethical awareness, but it can make previously implicit relations of representation available for discussion and response. In this way, the public program extends the exhibition's concern with animal representation and places part of the responsibility for interpretation with participants.

Compared with the family program, the youth project also expands the social scope within which co-creation

occurs. Whereas the former primarily uses the family as its collaborative unit, *Pets' Eyes* uses peer viewing and response to turn the wider participant group into a temporary interpretive community. Co-creation therefore does not only mean audiences providing content to an institution; it can also involve participants collectively producing social conditions for viewing and exchange, enabling individual experiences to be reinterpreted and responded to by others.

4.3 Pets' Impact: Discursive Co-Creation Through Dialogue and Ethical Reflection

Pets' Impact is designed for adult audiences and is organized around interdisciplinary knowledge sharing, structured interaction supported by an animal-welfare organization, and open discussion. Proposed elements include a psychologist's introduction to pet companionship and well-being, knowledge concerning animal behavior and welfare, professionally supported interaction with animals, and facilitated group discussion. Compared with the drawing and photography programs, this project lacks an obvious material-making component. Its participatory quality should therefore not be judged by whether it produces visible objects, but by whether audiences are able to enter processes of knowledge exchange and public discussion.

From this perspective, expert-led components are not necessarily incompatible with participatory curating. The key question is how professional knowledge enters the public program. If expert opinion is transmitted unidirectionally as an unquestionable conclusion, audiences remain relatively passive. If such knowledge is designed as a starting point for discussion and participants are able to bring their own experiences, questions, and differing positions into the exchange, expert knowledge can become a resource for shared meaning-making. The curatorial focus of this program is therefore not merely to invite professionals into the exhibition space, but to build relationships among artistic context, professional knowledge, and the lived experience of the public.

Structured interaction supported by an animal-welfare organization adds an embodied dimension to this process. Participants can encounter animals within clearly defined welfare and safety boundaries, but such contact should not itself be equated with co-creation. Its curatorial function is primarily to provide a shared experience for subsequent discussion, so that questions of companionship, care, animal agency, and human responsibility do not remain entirely abstract.

This article describes this mode as discursive co-creation. Unlike material co-creation, its principal output is not a physical object; unlike narrative co-creation, it does not center primarily on individual stories. Instead, it focuses on reciprocal responses among different forms of knowledge, experience, and ethical position. The institution frames the topic, invites professional contributors, and establishes the structure for discussion, but the meaning that ultimately emerges cannot be fully predetermined by the curatorial team. It develops through negotiation among professional knowledge, artistic context, and participant experience. This structure corresponds to Lacy's (1995) understanding of artistic practice as a platform for social relations and public exchange and demonstrates how public programming can extend from exhibition interpretation into cultural mediation and the organization of public issues.

The program also highlights an easily overlooked issue in participatory curating: visible activity and actual agency do not correspond perfectly. Listening cannot simply be defined as passive, and speaking publicly does not automatically constitute co-creation. A participant may critically reorganize their understanding while listening without expressing that process publicly; conversely, frequent speaking does not necessarily mean that a person's contribution genuinely enters the formation of shared meaning. For discourse-centered programs, the design of participatory mechanisms is therefore particularly important. Open-ended questions, direct participant-to-participant responses, time for disagreement, and methods for recording emergent themes can all make the audience's position within meaning production more explicit.

Compared with the first two projects, *Pets' Impact* therefore places greater demands on facilitation and discussion structure. Material works and personal narratives possess relatively visible forms, whereas discursive contributions can easily disappear when an event ends if they lack mechanisms for documentation, response, or recirculation. If the project is implemented, devices such as a question wall, discussion records, keyword mapping, or a post-event public text could allow viewpoints generated on site to re-enter the curatorial space. This would not only strengthen the visibility of discursive co-creation but also create analytical material for subsequent audience research.

5. Discussion

5.1 Participation Is Not a Single Category

Cross-case comparison shows that the differences among the three programs are not primarily a matter of "more" or "less" participation, but of the positions participants occupy within meaning production. Analysis of participatory public programs therefore needs to shift from activity formats to role relations: who can generate content, who can interpret it, who can respond to the contributions of others, and whether these contributions alter what becomes visible or discussable within the program. Participation is thus better understood as a set of

relationships organized by curatorial structures rather than as a single category.

This distinction matters because a formal increase in participatory activity does not necessarily mean that interpretive power has changed. If participant input were removed, would the program still communicate almost exactly the same content and interpretations? If the answer is yes, participation remains primarily a response to an existing structure. If participant-generated works, narratives, or opinions alter what others see, how they understand it, or what they discuss, the program moves closer to co-creation. This criterion places emphasis on whether participant contributions have “meaning consequences,” rather than on whether an activity appears sufficiently interactive.

Accordingly, the article does not treat interaction, participation, and co-creation as a simple hierarchy of value, but as different configurations of agency. The crucial issue is not whether audiences act, but whether their actions enter chains of content production, interpretation, response, and circulation, and whether the institution preserves a meaningful place in which those contributions can have consequences.

5.2 Analytical Significance of the Three Modes of Co-Creation

The value of the three modes of co-creation lies not in relabeling projects but in making the question “what is being co-created?” more precise. Material, narrative, and discursive co-creation correspond respectively to different carriers of meaning: works and visible content; stories and interpretations; and public discussion and the negotiation of values. Because a single program may contain several of these carriers, the framework should be understood as a set of analytical dimensions rather than as mutually exclusive program categories.

The framework first separates co-creation from a narrow understanding centered on the production of material outcomes. Cultural institutions often favor outputs that can be photographed, displayed, and quantified, but visible products do not directly indicate how much interpretive freedom participants have acquired. Conversely, a discussion that produces no physical object may still possess a strong co-creative quality if participant viewpoints influence the direction of the issue and the understanding of others. Evaluation should therefore move from asking “how many outcomes were produced?” to asking “what can participants produce, change, and put into circulation?”

Cross-case comparison also highlights the importance of the circulation of meaning. Participant contributions acquire fuller public-cultural significance when they can be encountered, responded to, or reinterpreted by others. Family drawings depend on sharing and display to enter public space; youth photography gains social meaning through narrative and peer response; and adult discussion requires documentation, response, or follow-up texts if on-site viewpoints are not to disappear when the event ends. Co-creation concerns not only production but also how contributions become visible and acquire an afterlife within a temporary public.

The three modes therefore do not provide participatory curating with a hierarchical scale. Rather, they help curators distinguish the carriers of contribution, the ways contributions enter public space, and the interpretive consequences they may have for other participants.

5.3 Designing Participation for Different Publics

Comparison of the three projects also shows that audience segmentation acquires genuine curatorial significance only when it actually changes participatory mechanisms. Demographic information such as age, occupation, or interest does not automatically translate into effective public-program design. More important is how curators design corresponding entry pathways in relation to the media forms, expressive experience, and conditions of participation with which different publics are likely to be familiar.

The comparison further suggests that different publics do not require a linear increase in “openness,” but different combinations of scaffolding and autonomy. The family program provides relatively explicit support through shared looking and making; the youth program leaves greater authorial space for image selection, narrative organization, and peer response; and the adult program requires a balance between the credibility of professional knowledge and the openness of discussion.

This also shows that participatory design does not mean minimizing structure. Different publics require different degrees of guidance and openness. For children and families, a completely open task may increase uncertainty; a clear sequence of looking, making, and sharing provides necessary scaffolding. For young participants, overly prescriptive creative tasks may restrict personal expression, so the program needs to leave greater space for authorship and peer interpretation. For adult discussion, a balance between professional knowledge and open exchange is required to prevent the event from reverting to one-way knowledge transmission.

Audience-responsive curating therefore does not mean giving every participant the same degree of freedom; it means adjusting structure to the modes of participation appropriate to particular publics. Emotional perception, creative expression, and critical reflection should likewise not be understood as a hierarchy of capacities among age groups. Adults can also enter an issue through emotion, children can make critical judgments, and young

people can participate in ethical debate. The three pathways describe only the principal invitation offered by each program, rather than essentializing audience capacities. Their function is to help curators ask how a particular public is most likely to enter a theme and how that initial form of participation might be guided toward more complex meaning-making.

5.4 From Audiences to Publics

Participatory public programming also produces an important conceptual shift: from understanding an “audience” as a pre-existing statistical category to understanding a “public” as a collectivity formed through circulation, response, and relationship. Warner’s (2002) discussion emphasizes that publics are not defined solely in advance by demographic characteristics but emerge through the circulation of discourse and mutual response. For this study, public programming therefore involves not only recruiting target audiences but also creating conditions in which participants can see and respond to one another around a shared issue and form temporary cultural relationships.

This distinction is particularly significant in the case of *The Pet Show*. Companion animals are closely embedded in everyday life, and participants are likely to enter the programs with existing personal experiences of companionship, care, loss, responsibility, pet ownership, and family relationships. One function of public programming is to place these private experiences in relation to artworks, professional knowledge, and the experiences of other participants. Exhibition meaning is therefore no longer derived exclusively from the institution and artists, but is negotiated among curatorial knowledge, artistic practice, and public experience.

Within this structure, a public is not a pre-existing group waiting to be served by a cultural institution; it is temporarily organized through exchange, response, and shared interpretation. Families form small relational networks through collaborative making; young participants form peer interpretive communities through images and stories; and the adult program seeks to establish a discursive public around care, animal welfare, and ethical responsibility. Although these public relationships may be temporary, their significance lies in the institution’s shift from merely communicating content to audiences toward creating conditions for cultural relationships among different subjects.

The movement from spectator to co-creator therefore does not mean that curatorial authority is fully relinquished. Cultural institutions remain responsible for framing issues, activity ethics, participant safety, the selection of collaborators, and basic standards of knowledge. A more appropriate model is distributed agency: curators design the conditions of participation; artists and professionals contribute contextual knowledge; participants generate new content and interpretations through works, narratives, and discussion; and institutions support the visibility, response, and circulation of those contributions. Co-creation emerges not when institutions withdraw, but when the roles of different actors in meaning production are reorganized.

5.5 Implications for Cultural-Institutional Practice

At the practical level, the analysis can be translated into a participatory curatorial logic composed of public identification, contribution design, circulation of meaning, and institutional responsibility. First, when identifying target publics, cultural institutions should move beyond demographic categories and consider what kinds of participatory relationships different publics can reasonably be invited to enter. Second, program design should specify what participants can actually contribute—works, stories, interpretations, questions, judgments, discussion, or combinations of these. Only when participant roles are made concrete can participation move from an abstract principle to an operational curatorial mechanism.

Third, programs need corresponding mechanisms for the circulation of meaning. If participant-generated content cannot be seen, responded to, or reinterpreted by others, co-creation can easily remain at an individual level. Temporary displays, peer response, collective discussion, textual documentation, and subsequent communication can all become important components of a co-creative structure. Fourth, participatory curating must clarify the responsibilities that institutions cannot fully relinquish. Where child safety, animal welfare, content ethics, professional information, or the representation of others is involved, institutions must continue to assume responsibility for structural design and ethical oversight.

The framework can also provide more targeted dimensions for evaluating public programs. Conventional evaluation often emphasizes attendance, satisfaction, and completion rates. If co-creation is a program goal, however, evaluation should also ask whether participants understood their roles, whether their contributions entered public space, whether participants responded to the content of others, and whether the program generated interpretations that were not entirely predetermined by the institution. Compared with measuring the scale of participation alone, these indicators more closely reflect participatory curating’s concern with agency and meaning production.

Finally, the design of the three programs suggests that public programming should not be treated merely as an educational or promotional addition appended after an exhibition has been completed. When participation is

incorporated early in the curatorial process, public programs can become part of the exhibition's interpretive structure, providing another pathway for meaning production beyond artworks themselves. For cultural institutions seeking to position themselves as spaces of social dialogue and public reflection rather than merely display, the value of participatory public programming lies not only in expanding audience numbers but in rethinking how institutions organize relationships among different actors and how publics can genuinely enter processes of cultural meaning-making.

6. Limitations and Future Research

The principal limitation of this study is that it analyzes the structures of proposed programs rather than actual processes of participation. It therefore cannot determine whether participants would in practice take up the roles made available by the designs, nor can it observe how facilitation, group power differences, silent participation, self-selection, or unexpected on-site factors might alter the quality of co-creation. In other words, the study can analyze "what forms of agency are enabled by design," but cannot demonstrate the extent to which such agency would be realized in practice.

Future implementation could test the framework through mixed methods. Pre- and post-event questionnaires could examine changes in participants' understanding of exhibition issues; on-site observation could record who speaks, who makes decisions, who responds to whom, and whether different contributions genuinely enter public discussion; semi-structured interviews could explore how participants understand their own roles; and content analysis of drawings, photographs, captions, and discussion records could compare the meanings actually generated by the three modes of co-creation. If research involves minors, participant images, or records of on-site discussion, appropriate research ethics approval, parental or guardian consent, and informed-consent procedures should be completed before implementation.

A second limitation concerns age segmentation itself. Although age can be useful for program design, it may obscure differences in prior cultural participation, physical or cognitive characteristics, language, family structure, experience of pet ownership, and confidence in self-expression. Future research could therefore examine whether the proposed modes of co-creation are better predicted by life stage, prior experience, participatory motivation, or preferred modes of expression rather than age alone. The framework is intentionally designed with sufficient flexibility to support such revisions.

A third limitation concerns context. The three programs were designed for a photography-focused cultural institution in Shanghai and a pet-themed exhibition; their transferability cannot be assumed. Comparative research could examine whether material, narrative, and discursive co-creation operate in similar ways in history museums, science centers, artist-run spaces, or community cultural projects. Such comparison would help determine whether the framework describes broader patterns in participatory curating or is primarily useful as a design tool for a particular case.

7. Conclusion

Through a design-oriented case analysis of three public programs developed around Fotografiska Shanghai's The Pet Show, this article has examined how curatorial structures can create conditions for audiences to move from viewing toward co-creation. Rather than treating "participation" as a general indicator of activity, the analysis has focused on what participants are invited to produce, how their contributions enter public space, and whether those contributions can be responded to and circulated further.

The comparative analysis identifies three dominant modes of co-creation. The family workshop emphasizes material co-creation by translating exhibition viewing into collaborative drawing and public display. The youth photography exchange emphasizes narrative co-creation by positioning participants simultaneously as photographers, storytellers, viewers, and peer interpreters. The adult program emphasizes discursive co-creation by bringing professional knowledge, embodied encounter, and audience experience into ethical dialogue.

More broadly, participatory curating should not be equated with "more activities" or "greater informality." Meaningful participation depends on whether program structures create conditions in which participant contributions can have interpretive consequences. The curator's role is therefore not simply to withdraw, but to shift from being the sole producer of interpretation toward becoming a designer of participatory conditions. In practice, co-creation can acquire clearer public significance when participants can recognize their own contributions, encounter those of others, and see those contributions enter processes of viewing, interpretation, or discussion.

For cultural institutions, the framework offers a practical alternative to a "one form of participation fits all" approach. Public programs can be organized around three interconnected questions: Who is this public, and through what means can it most readily enter the issue? What are participants invited to contribute? What structures can make those contributions visible, responsive, and capable of influencing subsequent understanding and discussion? These questions cannot guarantee successful participation, but they can make the curatorial logic

of participation analyzable, comparable, and open to empirical testing after implementation. In this sense, the movement from audience to co-creator is not a predetermined effect but a question to be answered jointly through design and research.

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